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ABSTRACT

This preliminary study examined the effects of the Family Leave Act of 1993 on the maternity leave experiences of women in academe, as well as the effect of pregnancy leave on their career decisions. Case study interviews were conducted with seven women faculty from four universities, and family leave policies at these institutions were reviewed. The interviews revealed that none of the women utilized the Family Leave Act -- three relied exclusively on sick leave, three timed their pregnancies so that they would occur during the summer break, one took only 2 weeks off before returning to work, and one hired others to help her finish the term. Many of the women reported waiting to become pregnant until they had reached some career hurdle, such as a defended dissertation or establishment in their job. They also discussed the positive and negative impacts of pregnancy and child rearing on their research, careers, and chances for tenure, as well as the perceptions of their colleagues toward motherhood and the bringing of their children to the office. (MDM)

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Living with the Family Leave Act of 1993:
Case Studies from Women in Academe

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Living with the Family Leave Act of 1993: Case Studies from Women in Academe

Delores D. Liston, Marlynn M. Griffin, Jeanette M. Hecker -- Georgia Southern University

Genesis of the Research Project:

This project emerged out of personal experience, and in many ways remains of interest to the researchers because of direct personal experience rather than mere academic interest. The three co-authors discovered that although we all work at the same institution, we had very different experiences regarding family leave arrangements with our first pregnancies. We then began wondering what women in academe throughout the United States were experiencing, and began collecting case studies to explore those experiences.

Methodology:

We used case studies to analyze the family and maternity leave policies as interpreted by women faculty and their administrators at institutions of higher education. Specifically, we were interested in determining how policy decisions shape lived experiences.

Synopsis of Findings:

Institutions of higher education recognize the changing demographic constitution of faculty, but the Family Leave Act has not always impacted, much less improved, the working conditions of women faculty members.

Common Threads which Emerged from the Interviews:

1. Usefulness of the Family Leave Act – most women cannot take advantage of leave
2. Factors Influencing Family Planning in Academia
 - a) Academic Calendar
 - b) Career considerations - Hurdles to be crossed
3. Impacts of Pregnancy and Childbirth on Career
4. Perceptions of Others' Attitudes
 - a) Favorable disposition toward motherhood in general
 - b) Bringing babies into the office
 - c) Other perceptions
5. How males are Treated/Perceptions of Double Standards
6. Suggested Improvements to Family Leave Policy

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Introduction: Genesis of the Research Project

This project emerged out of personal experience, and in many ways remains of interest to the researchers because of direct personal experience rather than mere academic interest.

The three co-authors of this paper come from varying backgrounds. Two are currently professors in the field of educational foundations: one in the area of social foundations and philosophy and the other in the area of psychological foundations. The third is a professor of foreign language (French).

We met and began working on this project as a result of our own first pregnancies. Through our initial and continuing conversations, we discovered that although we all three work at the same institution (and two in the same department), we were having very different experiences regarding family leave arrangements. Thus, we began to wonder what women in academe were experiencing throughout the United States. If our experiences within one institution were so diverse, how varied is the range nationwide, and what similarities do all women who experience pregnancy while working in academe share?

This presentation is an initial exploration of these questions. As we have worked, gathering case studies of seven women and reviewing family leave policies at a convenience sampling of institutions, we have begun to piece together a sketch of some of the similarities these women share, as well as some of the variations on this experience. Also, we have discovered more questions and other angles which need further research to fill in this initial sketch.

Today, we will present you with these preliminary findings, and our trajectory for further research.

Methodology

The primary objective of our discussion is to utilize case studies to demonstrate how policies and procedures related to family leave (especially pregnancy and maternity leave) at institutions of higher education in the United States affect the lived experiences of women faculty members. Of particular importance are the ways in which these women and their administrators interpret the Family Medical and Leave Act of 1993 (Family Leave Act).

We conducted case studies through individual interviews with seven women faculty members. The sampling technique utilized was convenience sampling. The researchers contacted (by telephone) women they knew who had recently given birth or who had contact with women who had recently given birth and asked if they were willing to volunteer to participate in the study. We used the following criteria to determine eligibility for the study:

- 1) Does the volunteer currently have only one child?
- 2) Was the volunteer employed in a tenure track faculty position at the time of the pregnancy and birth of the child?
- 3) Was the volunteer's child born in 1993 or later?

Through our presentation and analysis of representative policies, we aim to stimulate dialogue and encourage comparison of current family leave policies at colleges and universities in the United States. Our study yields insights into the promotion of and support for diversity on college campuses, enables better informed policy-making decisions, and provides up to-date delineation of the human dimension that affects and is affected by these policies.

The theoretical framework of our study is formed through an analysis of family and maternity leave policies as interpreted by women faculty at institutions of higher education. The Family Leave Act guarantees new mothers up to twelve weeks of unpaid

leave. Interpretations of this policy reflect a wide range from granting employees a total of twelve weeks per family of unpaid leave (e.g. Georgia Southern University, Southwestern Missouri State University) to one month of maternity leave with pay (e.g. University of Michigan) to two workweeks of paid leave per employee in addition to medical leave (e.g. University of Pittsburgh where the medical leave policy allows employees to receive regular salary for up to 26 weeks during any 12-month period in the event of illness).

We examine the economic and professional impacts these policies have on the lives of mothers-to-be. For example, at a time when family expenses are increasing, the income of many families is decreasing due to unpaid maternity leave policies. In addition, the tenure timeline at most institutions of higher education is not conducive to childbearing. By the time many women faculty members have received tenure, they are of an age at which the risks associated with pregnancy are increased. Yet trying to care for an infant while still maintaining productivity levels compatible with receiving tenure is difficult at best. In the sample of policies we reviewed, we found that for example, the University of Pittsburgh has a formal leave policy stating that an employee who takes family or medical leave may request not to count the year in which the leave is taken toward mandatory tenure review.

Our review of these policies raises questions concerning the extent to which policy decisions shape lived experiences. The methods we employ are based in qualitative research and interpretive inquiry drawn from individual interviews with seven women faculty members at colleges campuses in the United States. We address ways in which the administration of family leave policies serves to enhance, as well as frustrate, attempts to live within institutions of higher education.

Common Threads which Emerged from the Interviews

There were several common threads which emerged from our interviews of faculty women who had recently become mothers.

A. Usefulness of the Family Leave Act

Our findings regarding the applicability of the Family Leave Act were the least surprising. Of the women we interviewed none utilized the Family Leave Act. Every single woman we interviewed made alternative arrangements in order to avoid taking time off without pay. Three women relied exclusively on sick leave, one of whom had stockpiled as much as 8 weeks of sick leave to allow some time off. Of the other two, one took only two weeks before returning to work, and the other delivered near the end of a term, and was able to take advantage of a break between terms to extend her time at home after delivery. Three other women timed their pregnancies so that delivery coincided with the summer break. Lastly, the other woman we interviewed personally hired others to help her finish the term in which she delivered. Other arrangements included coordinating a course release for the term in which delivery would occur and timing student's projects so they would not be meeting in class for the period following the due date. Only one woman we interviewed even mentioned knowing a woman who did utilize the Family Leave Act, but this woman was at an institution which extended the mandated provisions and granted paid leave.

B. Factors Influencing Family Planning in Academia

1. Academic Calendar

Since none of the women we interviewed utilized the Family Leave Act, it is also not surprising that the first priority in planning pregnancy centered around the academic calendar. Of the women we interviewed Simone expressed the greatest concern for planning around the academic calendar:

Yes, I planned it [delivery] for the summer because we don't have any ... basically if someone is ill or has a baby or whatever, your colleagues have to cover for them. And although I could have used my sick leave ... it still amounts to my colleagues having to teach for me. So I thought I didn't like that solution. So we were trying for a summer baby which worked out and I wasn't sure, you know, if it didn't work out if I would have kept on trying or not. It didn't get that far, but I mean, the question crossed my mind.

Rita also expressed her desire to conform to the academic year:

Well, I did plan my pregnancy. I basically had only been here ... for about a year and I hadn't done a lot of investigation into maternity policies or anything like that and I think even if I had I might not have made any changes in when I timed the pregnancy... Naturally I planned my pregnancy at the end of the semester, end of spring semester ... so it worked out pretty good... My son was born late and he was born on the first day of finals.

Gloria also expressed a desire to keep the academic calendar in mind as she planned her pregnancy.

Well, I did plan my pregnancy and the things I kept in mind were basically the yearly teaching schedule and that was the most important thing. I planned my pregnancy so that my baby was born early in the summer. I didn't have any teaching responsibilities during the summer, so I essentially had more time to be home with my child.

2. Career Considerations -- Hurdles to be Crossed

The second consideration around planning pregnancy related to the point at which women were in their careers. Waiting until tenure is awarded would be the most ideal, but is not often feasible. By the time tenure occurs, most women are at an advanced age, thus increasing the risks of pregnancy to both mother and child. Although none of the women we interviewed waited to start a family until tenure, many waited to get pregnant until some career hurdle had been crossed. For Kate, this hurdle was her dissertation:

I think that the most important consideration [in planning pregnancy] was having the dissertation done. I knew that I could not get pregnant, or try to get pregnant until I had the dissertation written and defended. And that postponed my decision to start a family.

For Rita, completion of graduate school was insufficient. Her hurdle included getting through the first year in her new position at a Research I Institution.

I think the only other thing was really the timing of the pregnancy in my sort of career, not necessarily the school or department. What I did do was ... my husband and I started talking about having a child in my last year in graduate school, and um ... we decided ... I decided I didn't want to do that because that would mean I would have to go out on interviews pregnant. Being afraid of what that image would portray, I also delayed it after the first year I got here. I wasn't willing to get pregnant the first year I was here, I decided that was a bit too much. I didn't know the climate very much and I wasn't sure about how people would respond, so I waited until the second year and that seemed to be good timing.

Betty placed the hurdle even farther out of graduate school and into establishing herself as a professor.

Yes, I did plan the pregnancy, and um ... I guess the biggest consideration that I made was related to my age and how far along I was in my career and financial security more than the academic year ... I felt like, at the point when we went ahead and decided to get pregnant, it was the end of my fourth year and I felt like that would be ... um ... I had done "enough to be tenured," maybe not enough to be promoted. Promotion is important, but not as important as the tenure issue if I have to make choices between family and career... But I felt like I had done enough that if I couldn't do anything more, during the pregnancy, or after the baby was born, then it should not impact greatly my chances for tenure ... And I didn't think I wanted to get pregnant any earlier than that because I just didn't feel it would be appropriate for me to establish a pattern of work that people may not perceive as being serious or tenurable. And I felt that after a few years of people seeing my work habits and involvement ... that folks would be able to realize that that was fairly typical.

From the interviews, we observed that every woman expressed some desire to overcome some hurdle before adding motherhood to career aspirations.

C. Impacts of Pregnancy and Childbirth on Career

A third common thread which emerged from the interviews concerned career impacts. These concerns ranged from difficulty in maintaining research agendas (a concern expressed by most of the women we interviewed) and attending fewer conferences, to becoming more efficient in time management. Mary states her case simply and clearly:

I think the biggest impact [of childbirth on my career] has been on the scholarship, there's simply just not enough time. There is never enough time anyway, and then when you have small kids there's definitely not enough time.

On the other hand, Betty states:

I think that it's almost ironic that I've really been more productive during pregnancy and since [my daughter's] birth than beforehand, because I feel like I don't have any time to waste. And prior to that it was too easy to go in the office and if somebody stopped by to have a long extended conversation... And so, what I've found is um ... my productivity in terms of visible, producible work has increased. I'm doing more projects ... I have gotten more manuscripts out in the past year and a half than I did prior to [my daughter] being born.

Robin echoes Betty's experience:

I guess as far as impacting my career... um, for one thing [since the birth of my child] I do feel more organized. When I have fifteen minutes I would have said, "Oh, it's not enough time to get started on something." And I would have gone down the hall and visited with somebody. Now, I find that I can do some things in that time frame. So, I'm more productive in getting things done. Um... I'm also still trying to collaborate and work with colleagues on projects because I find that that helps in the getting things done process. As far as long-term projects, I feel that I have a very supportive husband so [motherhood] hasn't impinged or made it so that there are things that I absolutely cannot do... Now, it feels like I still meet deadlines, but it happens in those 15 minute intervals. Much more so than it did before. I think that's a long term career thing too, because it affects how much I'm able to get done. You can't do a major research project in

those fifteen minute intervals. But you can write lesson plans and syllabi ... so all of those things get done in a timely fashion. But it means the longer term goals as far as writing an article, doing the research, doing the ground work for getting something published takes longer and those are the things that aren't getting done ... not because I don't make them priorities, but because they can't be done in 15 minute intervals.

Betty also presents the other side. Although she may be more productive during those brief time periods, she worries about what other women in academe [those who choose not to have children] know. Her concern relates to maintaining a long-term research agenda.

... I know I don't pick up on a lot of things that a lot of women find offensive or bothersome or something about which they should be concerned. So, I don't think a lot about the identity thing, ... but I guess one of the things that kept coming to mind was... of the women I know who are successful academics, faculty members, researchers whatever... most of them don't have children. So, I kept questioning "what am I doing to my career?" and so I guess, and then "Is it [having children] important enough?" "What's more important?" "Do I really want to have this child enough that I don't care how it impacts the career as long as I can still have some career?" And I think also during the pregnancy is when I sort of realized that chances are given the fact that my husband and I both are in higher education it's going to be hard for us to find jobs together in another institution, combined with the fact that neither one of us at this point with the choice we've made to have a child, and maybe another child, is going to be able to do that sixty or seventy hour work week or even a good forty five. You know, I try very conscientiously to get in forty but I feel like once I've put in my forty, that's it. But that's very different from before I was pregnant when it was just "work until it gets done." ... So, anyway, I guess that I [was] sort of questioning the kind of contribution I would make. And questioning whether I was really serious enough about my career. And I had to go through a little bit of searching with that, um because ... a couple of women that I know from other institutions sort of responded to my pregnancy with this sort of hidden look or expression, though not quite hidden of "Oh, you just signed a death sentence to your career." So there was some questioning I think a little bit.

Gloria speaks for all interviewees when she relates the overall shift in priorities and availability of time:

I'm slow at getting things done and behind on some things I wanted to have done by now. I'm less mobile, less able to go to conferences, that sort of thing. So I've turned down some conference opportunities that I would have taken up otherwise. I do spend somewhat less time working than I did previously. Just nuts and bolts things are harder to get done, you know, like going in a night and working, and being free to stay over the dinner hour or that sort of thing.

D. Perceptions of Others' Attitudes

During the interviews, we also asked women what kinds of perceptions they had about the attitudes of colleagues. Of course, these perceptions are interpretations of the comments and/or actions of others, and not necessarily the attitudes which may be expressed by these others. Nonetheless, the perception of these attitudes affects the behaviors of women in academe.

1. Favorable Disposition Toward Motherhood in General

Gloria expressed favorable impressions of her colleague's responses to her shift into motherhood.

Well, frankly I think this is a pretty family oriented department and I think a lot of people thought I was weird. I was in my late thirties and didn't have children. So, in some respects I think they are more accepting of me. I guess they see me as more sort of normal or they have more things to talk to me about or something because I have a child. Although I am the first female assistant professor to have a child in the department, so in some respects I think they don't know how to handle that.

2. Bringing Babies into the Office

In spite of this increased collegiality, and increased interpersonal communication with colleagues, Gloria also expressed feeling a "lack of support" regarding her working conditions.

...in terms of support, or lack thereof, in my department,... my chair made explicit to one of my colleagues who had a child about six months before I

did that he was not to bring the child into the office, and so in some respects, that made me feel less supported. I don't feel comfortable bringing my baby in during office hours, you know 8-5. So that's been a way I don't feel very supported.

Mary has also addressed this issue of bringing children in to the office. At Mary's institution, students and faculty both face this challenge:

...we have a lot of nontraditional students at this college. And college schedules don't coincide with public school schedules. So, it often happens that the kids have a day off and the parents have no child care. So, parents will sometimes bring, you know, kids to class. One of my colleagues it really bothers. And I think that same sort of thing would be if I constantly or brought my kids regularly. Although as a chairperson now I'm bringing my daughter ... on two days a week when I do the chairperson stuff. If they don't like it they can find a different chair.

So, it seems from the interviews that there are a variety of factors which come into play as women (or men) faculty members seek to bring their children into the workplace. Whatever the outcome, this concern arises at some point.

3. Other Perceptions

In contrast to Mary, whose position as chair may deter some of the negative attitudes about professional women becoming mothers, Simone felt a lot of reticence about her colleagues' attitudes. Simone was so discrete that some colleagues didn't know she was pregnant until they saw her with a baby.

I didn't really start showing until January or February. Fall semester was not a problem... I didn't talk about it really. I didn't really think it was an issue; it was going to be a summer baby anyway, and um, as far as that goes, I mean, believe it or not, some of my students didn't even realize I was pregnant... You know, I was wearing baggy clothes and stuff like that and sometimes I would sit down more than I usually do in some classes... As I said, some of my students didn't realize, some of my colleagues didn't realize. You know, there was a colleague ... that I saw, I don't know, a few weeks before I had my kid, and then he saw me with the baby ... then he said "Is that your baby? I didn't realize you were pregnant!" So I guess I did a good job keeping a low profile...

Further, Simone expressed concern that the prevailing attitude regards parenthood as a personal choice whose consequences each woman must face individually:

I think there is quite a bit of, you know, perceptions about, you know, men or older faculty or so forth, that if you have children, you're not really professional... [yet] if we didn't have children, we wouldn't have jobs as teachers ... I was on a committee once where we were giving out grants, well, fellowships for students, and uh, one of them was asking if you had hardships or things like that. One of them said he was a grad student and had a two year old or something ... One of the males, of course, faculty members on the committee said nobody asked him to have a child. That's why I feel that's something that's really prevalent and there is really a sexist view. If you choose to have a child, you have to deal with the consequences which is doing as much as everyone else.

In contrast to most of the women we interviewed, Kate observed how family leave policy both reflects and shapes attitudes of women in academe who become mothers. She notes:

In different musings of mine, I came to the realization that really in the academic world there are two major assumptions that are still there: A: that is you're an academic, you're male and don't have to be concerned with maternity leave, and B: if you are female, you have another salary to fall back on.

All of these perceptions which the women we interviewed expressed, whether systemic or based on experiences with individuals, reveal the tensions of balancing family and career. These tensions have also been expressed through planning of pregnancy and career impacts discussed earlier.

E. How males are treated/Perceptions of Double Standards

Although we did not ask any questions regarding the treatment of males as they become new fathers, several of the women we interviewed brought in some differences they perceive between motherhood and fatherhood in academe. In some ways, males are treated more favorably, while in others they are treated with less favor.

Gloria notes that at her institution she was effortlessly granted an extension on the tenure clock, although she did not take family leave around the birth of her child. Her husband also asked for an extension on the tenure track, and was granted it only after much struggle.

What they told my husband was that they only granted extensions on the tenure clock for people who actually took some form of leave of absence like 1/2 time or 3/4 time. And I didn't do that, and yet my request was approved. Now, I don't know if that was an oversight or what, but to me ... I don't think that 3/4 time reduction in pay or what have you is necessary or should be required to apply for the extension.

Mary notes how some of her female colleagues applaud male colleagues for bringing their children to meetings, but castigate female colleagues for not making appropriate daycare arrangements.

There was a male colleague in the theater department who was always bringing his two young kids to meetings. He's got two little boys. And I never heard anyone say anything except how wonderful it was, what a good parent he was. And I, as a woman, didn't feel, ... actually it was one of my female colleagues that had made some comment about how she paid for full-time daycare for her kids, and I only had part-time care for mine. And that I shouldn't, the implication was that I should put mine in 40 hours a week.

While Mary speaks specifically about male colleagues having greater liberties to bring children to the office, Robin speaks more broadly of the freedoms granted to men:

Although, when I look at how the new father in my department is treated versus how the new mothers are treated, I think there is some more of a feeling of "Oh, you're a new mother now, and we have to treat you in a different way," than there is for the new father. It's almost as if nothing happened for him. Whereas for me, it feels like there must be something different. I feel like [my husband] gets the same at his work ... people um ... know that he has a young child at home, but it's not the same kind of ... they look at you [as a new mother] like, "we don't expect you to really have time for this"... and ... I can't explain it ... as if they are asking "Where IS the baby?" and implying I should be home with her.

Betty brings this question back to career impacts regarding tenure and promotion. She relates a conversation with her father:

Now this is my interpretation, but I don't think that male academics, unless their wife is also in the academy, I don't think that they have a sense of the career killing potential because they have wives. See, if I had a wife that didn't work, my life would be very easy. And, ... I just remember a conversation I was having with my father when he was asking about somebody getting promoted, and I said this person was going up early for promotion. We were discussing the politics and the benefits of that and he says, "Why don't you go up early?" And I said "because I'm not ready. You have to have more to go up early than you do if you go up on time. I'm just not ready." And he said, "Well why not? And why is this person?" And he kept pushing, and it wasn't that he was trying to push too hard, or saying I wasn't good enough. It's just the way my father is, that I excel at everything, and what he doesn't realize is that while I may have excelled in high school, now I have everybody who excelled in high school that I'm working with. So, yeah. That's right, so we're all the "cream of the crop" and we're all the "big fish in the pond." And there aren't any little fish around anymore. So he doesn't realize that, and finally as he kept asking why I wasn't ready and why [he] was. I said "Because [he] had a stay at home wife, and I don't." And I think that, um ... men don't realize how much their wives do even if their wives are less traditional than I probably am because of the model I had, which was my mother who was a stay at home mom. And, um, I know that I find myself now still trying to do the lion's share of the housework, and all the grocery shopping, and all the bill paying and whatever cooking gets done which is pretty minimal at our house. And just doing most, taking over most of the responsibilities. So, I don't think that men perceive that, realize all that goes on. Unless they have to do it all themselves, or choose to do it all themselves, or are exceptionally insightful.

F. Improvements to Family Leave Policy

Our final common thread was as unsurprising as the first. The women we interviewed clearly stated that maternity leave policies could be made useful for more women and men if they were paid leave arrangements. The fact that the Family Leave Act currently presents women (and men) with a situation where their income decreases to zero during leave time, while their expenses dramatically increase makes the leave impossible for most people to take. Simone summed up the expressions of our interviewees

eloquently when asked: "What would you have liked to have seen in terms of maternity leave?"

Any kind of thing that would send a message that it's okay to have children during the school year. And that they understand that women have babies and they shouldn't have to ... sacrifice their family life to have a career...But I didn't even inquire about it because I know there is nothing and I didn't want to go and ask for something that wasn't there and get a bad reputation ... As long as they were not hiring someone to replace me, to me that was making a statement that I was being a burden on the rest of the department ... I think that's the statement ... they're making by not hiring anyone else.

Synopsis of Findings

Our research into the effects of the Family Leave Act on the lived experiences of female faculty during pregnancy and early motherhood indicate that institutions of higher education recognize the changing demographic constitution of faculty. Although maternity leave policies have gone from being virtually non-existent to addressing a broad spectrum of parental leave situations and needs (Hyde and Essex, 1991), our case studies indicate that the Family Leave Act has not always impacted, much less improved, the working conditions of women faculty members.

Work patterns of women are not greatly affected by the promise of twelve weeks of unpaid leave. (Klerman and Leibowitz, 1995) The female faculty members of our case studies voiced dissatisfaction with the policy, because it does not accurately reflect the importance of the mother's loss of income as a determining factor in how much leave is taken. Indeed, these women created informal leave arrangements, including course reductions, applications of sick leave to maternity leave, donations of sick leave from sick-leave banks, and increased course load in a subsequent term. Success of these practices depended upon external variables, such as the departmental atmosphere toward family. Thus, as long as family leave remains unpaid, the number of women who will be able to take such leave will remain negligible.

Through our case studies it has become obvious that policy must be open to interpretation where pregnancy and maternity are concerned. The frustrations experienced by our participants and their necessary innovations for maternity leave suggest that the rigid application of policy in the academy would only serve to increase the conflict women feel as they adapt to the physical changes of pregnancy and the changes in identity in their dual roles of professor and mother.

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